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ABSTRACT

Shared group consciousness among individuals of ascriptively deprived social categories acts to mobilize strongly identified group members, suggesting that old age identifiers among elderly Americans should also participate in politics at higher rates than those found for non-identified older people. Survey data from both the 1972 and 1976 presidential elections, however, reveal that the opposite is true--old age identifiers were less politically involved than the elderly who did not identify with "older people." Alternative theoretical explanations are offered for the observed negative correlation between old age identification and participation: (1) old age identifiers are disadvantaged by low levels of human and socioeconomic resources which prevent them from participating; (2) the unexpected lack of involvement among the age conscious elderly is a reflection of the personal powerlessness and apathy associated with popular stereotypes of the aged; and (3) both individual and group related attitudes of political efficacy influence participation. A multivariate empirical test of these different hypotheses indicated that the political participation of elderly Americans is affected by their socioeconomic resources and perceived influence. (Author)

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Age Consciousness and Political Mobilization of Older Americans

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ABSTRACT

Age Consciousness and Political Mobilization of Older Americans

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Previous literature indicates that shared group consciousness among individuals of ascriptively deprived social categories acts to mobilize strongly identified group members. This mobilization literature suggests that old age identifiers among elderly Americans should also participate in politics at higher rates than those found for non-identified older people. Survey data from both the 1972 and 1976 presidential elections, however, reveal that the opposite is true--old age identifiers were less politically involved than the elderly who did not identify with "older people."

Three alternative theoretical explanations are offered for the observed negative correlation between old age identification and participation. The first theory argues that old age identifiers are disadvantaged by low levels of human and socio-economic resources which prevent them from participating. A second view explains the unexpected lack of involvement among the age conscious elderly as a reflection of the personal powerlessness and apathy associated with popular stereotypes of the aged. The final theory investigates both individual and group related attitudes of political efficacy as they influence participation. A multivariate empirical test of these different hypotheses demonstrate the relative importance which socio-economic resources and the perceived influence of older people had on the political participation of elderly Americans.

Age Consciousness and Political Mobilization of Older Americans

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Reference group theory suggests that the characteristics of salient and important social strata are employed by individuals to define part of their self image (Cartwright and Zander, 1968; Stryker, 1978). Age has been treated as am important social stratification in previous research (see especially, Riley, Johnson and Foner, 1972) and common sense tells us that the perception of belonging to a particular age category may influence the way individuals organize, simplify and give meaning to their cognitions of themselves and their social environment.

The importance of older people as a reference group in American society hinges partly on the controversial question of whether or not they are an emerging force in American politics. This question is attracting increased attention among both academics and journalists as the proportion of older Americans increases in the population. Some cite this population trend alone as evidence of the impending emergence of "senior power" on a mass basis (for example, see Porter, 1973; Wheeler, 1971). Other observers believe that, in addition to an increase in sheer numbers, older adults are developing into an organized political force in response to age discrimination and economic hardship (Time Magazine, June 2, 1975, p. 51). Still other investigators dismiss "senior power" arguments as wholly unfounded and point to factors such as strong party identification and ideological conservativism as precluding a likelihood that older people will emerge as a viable political bloc in the forseeable future (Atchley, 1972; Campbell, 1971; Carlie, 1969).

These arguments, however often assume a specious character owing to the sweeping generalizations which are made about an extremely heterogeneous aggregate of people. There is an abundance of evidence suggesting that the differences among people sixty and over are at least as great as the differences among adults in younger age categories (for example, see Loether, 1967; Riley and Foner, 1968). Claims for or against "senior power" that tend to treat older people as a homogeneous group responding in concert to similar life circumstances therefore seem untenable.

But while older people as a whole are unlikely to emerge as a cohesive political force, indirect evidence suggests that a certain segment of the aged population may be disposed to increased socio-political consciousness and activity on the basis of their old-age status. This evidence comes largely from recent studies of social and political participation among members of racial and "ethnic" groups that are delineated and devalued in American society. Such studies have consistently shown that those members of ascriptively deprived groups who exhibit a sense of group identification (also referred to as a sense of "group consciousness") record substantially higher rates of social and political participation than do members of these same groups who exhibit no sense of group identification (Lane, 1962; Olsen, 1970; Verba and Nie, 1972). These findings have remained statistically significant when the effects of socioeconomic status were controlled and have proven fairly constant across several different modes of participation. Thus, regardless of socioeconomic background, group identifiers have regularly demonstrated higher levels of activity than nonidentifiers in voting, campaigning, community involvement, contacting officials, political discussion, and voluntary association participation. It has been concluded on the basis of these findings that identification with certain "deprived" groups counter-

acts the dampening effects of low socio-economic status and propels members toward involvement in a variety of social and political activities (for example, see Greeley, 1974; Olsen, 1970; Verba and Nie, 1972).

Some students of gerontology, aware of the possible mobilizing effect of group identification, have speculated that a sense of identification with older people as a group may have an impact on older adults similar to that found among members of racial and "ethnic" groups (Cutler, 1973b; Ragan and Dowd, 1974; Rose, 1965b; Trela, 1971). These studies suggest that older people who identify with their age group are more likely than non-identifiers to be active in a broad range of social and political activities. In short, older people who identify with their own age group are likely to consider age status as a salient political referent and to think and act accordingly.

Other gerontologists take serious exception to such claims (for example, see Atchley, 1971; Binstock, 1972; Loether, 1967; Streib, 1968). These critics contend that the notion of group identification has been inappropriately borrowed from literature dealing with minority groups and is largely irrelevant when applied to older adults. They typically support this claim by citing those studies which document the tendency of people sixty years and older to deny old age. They also argue that most older adults retain group identification characteristic of middle-aged people and interact across rather than within generational lines. This evidence, taken together, suggests to these critics that old age group identification is a pedantic issue which runs contrary to current information about how most older people view themselves and old age.

The position taken by each side in this debate has major weaknesses. Those who consider old age group identification a potentially mobilizing force, for example, do so on largely impressionistic rather than empirical grounds. This is because there has been little systematic study of age-related group identification, especially as it relates to social and polit-

ical behaviors. Furthermore, the few empirical studies which have been attempted are marked by sampling problems or other methodological difficulties.

The critics of the old age group identification thesis, on the other hand, fail to deal with this issue on its merits. Rather, they suggest that because a majority of older adults seem to deny old age, group identification among older people does not warrant serious consideration (Atchley, 1972, p. 248; Streib, 1968, p. 39). This stance, however, puts these skeptics into the untenable position of ignoring a potentially important source of variation in attitudes and behaviors of older adults.

Our study rests on the contention that the usefulness of old age group identification as an explanatory variable is a matter to be decided empirically and not on a priori logical grounds. Hence, we reject the notion that the issue of old age group identification is of no consequence simply because some people may deny they are old. On the contrary, we may find that maintaining a feeling of effectiveness and control in older age depends not so much on avoiding identifying as old, as in developing the group consciousness and mobilization that associates such identification with effectiveness and influences rather than powerlessness. Simply stated, what we need to determine is the extent to which old age identification serves as a stimulus to political involvement.

Age Identification Among Older Americans

The data reported here derive from two national probability samples studied in connection with the 1972 and 1976 national presidential elections. Age identification is defined in these studies as an awareness of kind, the perception of similarity or common interest among people sixty years or older with the social stratum, "older people." Unlike much previous research, our definition of age identification is sensitive to the necessity

for providing strata other than age as possible alternative characteristics of self identification (Mutran and Burke, 1979). Some people may not think of themselves in terms of age--neither as old, nor as middle-aged nor as young. Therefore for a valid measure of age identification, the respondent should not be forced to select age as a characteristic of self definition.

Respondents in the 1972 and 1976 national surveys[1] were handed a list of sixteen social categories (including age, sex, race, regional, class, religious, and political groups) and asked: "Please read over this list and tell me which of these groups you feel particularly close to--people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things." Then they were asked to look at the list again and choose the one to which they felt closest. Degree of age identification was then operationalized for the proposed research as follows: (1) not identified, respondents sixty years old or older who do not feel close to "older people," (2) identified, those sixty or over who said they feel close to "older people," and (3) strongly identified, those respondents sixty or older who felt closest to "older people." Table 1 presented below indicates the frequency and strength of old age identification in 1972 and 1976.

Table 1: Degree of Identification with "Older People" Among Respondents 60 Years and Older

Degree of Identification	1972	1976
Not Identified	38%	26%
Close	33	46
Closest	29	28
	100%	100%
(N)	(628)	(531)

TAble 1 shows that a substantial majority of Americans over 60 express some degree of identification with their age cohort. Furthermore, the proportion of elderly Americans who felt at least some identification with older

people increased between 1972 and 1976.[2] Moreover, the extensiveness of older Americans' age identification can perhaps be more fully appreciated when compared with identification in two other social strata in which active and visible movements have developed. Age identification among older people is nearly as widespread as race identification among blacks and more widespread than sex identification among women. For example, in 1976, 34 percent of the black sample felt "closest" to "blacks" and 11 percent of the female sample felt closest to "women," compared to 28 percent of the sample older than sixty who felt "closest" to "older people."

The critical question of interest here, to which we turn next, is the implication of this age identification for mobilizing the elderly to participate in political activities.

Age Identification and Political Participation

Table 2 presents the relationship between age identification and turnout in the 1972 and 1976 presidential election studies.

Contrary to the mobilization hypothesis (the expectation of a higher rate of participation for the most strongly age identified), Table 2 shows exactly the opposite. Turnout among older citizens who did not identify with their age group was significantly higher than the proportion who voted among the most strongly identified. Similar relationships were found both in 1972 and 1976. Thus, the results are not simply a reflection of conditions that were unique to either election. Furthermore, age identification among the elderly was found to be similarly related to other types of electoral participation, such as following the campaign in the news media, contributing money or working for political candidates. Likewise, participation in non-electoral political activities, such as writing letters to newspaper editors or contacting political officials, was also lower among the old age identified than among the non-identifiers.

Table 2: Electoral Participation by Age Identification Among the Elderly, 1972 and 1976

	1972		1976	
Age Identification	Voted	Did Not Vote	Voted	Did Not Vote
Not Identified	77%	23	81%	19
Close	72%	28	76%	24
Closest	62%	38	64%	36
Zero order correlation	-.12		-.13*	

*p .01

In short, the evidence arguing against a mobilizing effect for age identification is convincing. We could stop at this point and conclude that age group identification, unlike other types of group identification, does not appear to effectively mobilize category members (Miller, Gurin and Gurin, 1970). We prefer to investigate this relationship further. After all, why is the correlation negative? What explains the negative relationship and accounts for participation levels among older people in general and, more specifically, among those who identify with their older age cohort?

Previous literature on political participation (Milbrath and Goel, 1972; Verba and Nie, 1972) and work relating group consciousness with involvement in political activities (Miller, Gurin and Gurin, 1979) suggest three major hypotheses which may explain participation among the elderly. These explanations focus on the human and economic resources of individuals; their sense of personal competence and age denial; their individual and group political efficacy. Each of these explantions will be discussed in turn and then a multivariate analysis will be entertained in order to determine the relative importance of each explanation.

Explanations of the Negative Role of Age Identification on Political Participation

Human and Economic Resources

Older adults who are believed to be most inclined to take on an old age

identification are those who actually experience many of the problems often associated with old age in contemporary American society, especially if they live in close contact with age peers who encounter similar problems. Older people who, by comparison, are better-off--particularly if they live in relative isolation of age peers--are presumed less likely to identify with older people as a group. (See, for example, Cutler, 1973; Gubrium, 1973; Newgarten, 1964; Pinner, 1959; Riley and Foner, 1968; Rose, 1965b).

If these suppositions are correct, older adults who directly experience such problems as ill health, meager incomes, unemployment, low levels of education, or loss of spouse should be most likely to consider older people as a salient reference group. A stronger tendency to identify should also be noted among individuals in advanced old age, since age-related problems are likely to intensify with increased chronological aging. On the other hand, older adults who are more affluent, better educated, employed, married and chronologically younger should be less inclined to identify with older people as a group.

The data presented in Table 3 tend to support the prediction that elderly

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Table 3 goes here

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individuals who identify with the older age group have fewer socio-economic resources than non-identifiers. Old age non-identifiers are, on the average, better educated, enjoy a higher family income and tend to be chronologically younger than those who identify with older people. Each of these factors--age, education and income--represent important human or socio-economic resources which facilitate participation when present and deter it when absent. Chronological age among the elderly is likely to be associated with the incidence of illness and infirmities which physically hinder participation in social activities. Level of formal education has some bearing on the ability of individuals to pursue and grasp information about political events and is-

Table 3: Human and Socio-Economic Resources by Age Identification Among the Elderly, 1976

	AGE		
Age Identification	60's	70's	80's+
Not Identified	30%	18%	21%
Close	47	48	37
Closest	23	34	42
	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(311)	(163)	(61)

	INCOME			
	0 - $5,999	$6,000 - $11,999	$12,000 - $19,900	$20,000 or more
Not Identified	15%	30%	32%	43%
Close	45	45	55	41
Closest	40	25	13	16
	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(224)	(137)	(71)	(51)

	EDUCATION		
	Grade School	High School	College
Not Identified	21%	28%	30%
Close	42	46	53
Closest	37	26	17
	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(210)	(215)	(108)

sues from various channels of mass communication. Family income is also an important resource that may directly affect the ability of older citizens to register or make it to the polls on election day. A group that benefits from a relative abundance of these resources can be expected to participate at higher levels than a group which is relatively deprived.

Given that old age identifiers enjoy fewer of these human and socio-economic resources, controls for these factors should go a long way toward explaining the negative relationship between participation and old-age identification. The results of a multivariate regression analysis presented in Table 4 confirm these expectations. The previously significant relationship

Table 4: Multivariate Analysis Predicting Political Participation[a] from Old Age Identification, Chronological Age, Education and Income, 1976

	Total 60 Years and Older (N=719)	Closest Old Age Identifiers (N=152)
Predictors		
Old Age Identification[b]	-.05[c]	--
Age	-.06	-.25*
Education	.14**	.15
Income	.20**	.13
R	.33	.40

*p < .01 **p < .001

[a]The dependent variable was scored 1 = not voting 2 = voting

[b]Old age identification was scored 1 = not identified 2 = close 3 = closest

[c]Table entries are standardized regression coefficients.

between age identification and turnout has been reduced to nonsignificance. If the strongly identified were not older, less well educated, and with lower incomes they would not participate at significantly lower rates than the non-identifiers. Table 4 also shows the relative importance of these human and economic resources. Among the total set of elderly respondents income and education have the greatest effect on political participation, but among the old age identified age is most important. Perhaps this difference reflects the increased impact of ill health on the activities of individuals as they get older. Since the identified are already older than the non-identified, the results may represent this heightened effect of health factors among the oldest of the elderly. We return to this topic later.

Age Denial and Sense of Personal Competence

A second potential explanation for the low level of participation among the identified elderly arises from the stereotypes associated with old age and their presumed psychological impact on the individual's sense of personal competence. One stream of gerontological literature has focused on the denial of aging and its implication for age identity (Blau, 1973; Bultena and Powers, 1978; Peters, 1971; Riley and Foner, 1968). These studies reveal that older individuals frequently deny their own aging despite apparent changes that normally signal the onset of old age. Presumably this denial of aging occurs because older people are unwilling to accept as part of their self concept the negative stereotypes popularly associated with old age. Included among the negative characteristics which the public attributes to older people is the belief that they are senile, meddlesome, conservative, poor, dependent, apathetic and disengaged from political and social activities. Given such a negative image "old age"

is clearly a degrading status in American society. Thus, to refrain from adopting an identity that includes the label "old" suggests an active psychological rejection of these negative stereotypes as a description of oneself. The age denial thesis implies that older people who accept old age as part of their self image are also more likely to exhibit feelings of low personal competence and esteem because they have implicitly accepted the negative stereotypes associated with aging.

Accepting the image of "old", therefore, may either directly influence participation or it may do so indirectly through a reduction in personal competence, that is, the feeling of being in control of one's own daily life activities. Numerous studies have found that individuals who express a high degree of personal competence are more likely to assume political activist roles (Lane, 1959; Campbell, et al., 1960; Rosen and Salling, 1971; Gore and Rotter, 1963). Thus, finding a relatively low level of personal competence and age denial among old age identifiers may provide an explanation for their lower participation.

Before proceeding to examine this possible explanation, a brief discussion about our measure of age denial is in order. Previous studies of age denial have relied heavily on self reported identification as "old" to indicate age denial (for a summary see Bultena and Powers, 1978; Kogan, 1979; Mutran and Burke, 1979; Riley and Foner, 1968). However there are certain problems with these studies. One limitation lies in the blurred conceptualization of age denial and age identification. When elderly individuals fail to incorporate "old" as part of their self definition they may or may not be <u>denying</u> their age. Denial implies active rejection or a negative reference, whereas the absence of an identification with older people may simply indicate that age is not a salient category for self

comparison rather than a denial of that category. Given this conceptual distinction we have chosen to measure age denial with a "feeling thermometer" that assessed affect toward older people. The scale for this measure ranged from zero degrees as representing the most negative feelings to 100 degrees as the most favorable or warm feelings toward the old.

Table 5 relates age denial and sense of personal competence with age identification. Despite overall positive feelings of older respondents toward "older people", non-identifiers nonetheless expressed less positive affect toward older people, thereby implying somewhat more denial of aging. At least with this measure, older Americans who most strongly identify with their age cohort do not deny aging as much. In addition, Table 5 supports the argument that the elderly who identify with old age are more likely to exhibit a sense of personal powerlessness. And, as would be expected from Table 5, age denial and sense of personal competence were significantly, albeit weakly, intercorrelated (r = .10).

Table 5: Age Denial and Personal Competence by Age Identification Among the Elderly, 1976

	Age Denial[a]			Sense of Personal Competence[b]		
Age Identification	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
Not Identified (N=137)	8%	23	69	50%	20	30
Close (N=245)	3%	18	79	49%	16	35
Closest (N=152)	1%	13	86	42%	14	45

[a]This survey measure asked respondents to rate "older people" on a scale that ranged from zero to 100 with 50 as neutral. As used here the measure collapses values o-50 to designate a high degree age denial, 51-75 as medium and over 75 as indicating a low degree of age denial.

[b]Personal competence was measured with four items tapping the individual's sense of control over the course of their own life. See appendix for survey questions.

Taken together, the set of relationships among old age identification, age denial and personal powerlessness suggest a potential explanation for the lower participation levels of respondents most strongly identified with older people. Presumably, those persons who feel effective in dealing with their personal environment also feel effective in dealing with government, and therefore, tend to participate at higher rates.

However, although a sense of personal competence is significantly associated with participation, it fails to explain the negative correlation between old age identification and electoral turnout. As Table 6 demonstrates, a significant relationship between old age identification and

Table 6: Multivariate Analysis Predicting Political Participation from Old Age Identification, Age Denial and Personal Competence

Predictors	Total 60 Years and Older	Closest Old Age Identifiers
Old Age Identification	-.09*	--
Age Denial	-.06	-.04
Personal Competence	.20**	.18**
R	.24	.18

*P < .01 **p < .001

participation persists even after controlling for the effects of age denial and feelings of personal powerlessness. Moreover, the regression coefficients from Table 6 demonstrate that age denial itself, at least as measured here, has very little to do with whether or not older people are politically engaged. Perhaps during recent years the psychological

acceptance of aging itself has become less detrimental to the social and political involvement of the elderly than was suggested by earlier studies.

Individual and Group Political Efficacy

Thus far we have dealt with powerlessness as a personal issue, the individual's generalized sense of being able to direct and control his/her own life. In addition, individuals also assess their efficacy specifically in the political arena--whether they can influence political events and outcomes. A feeling of political powerlessness may result because individuals come to believe that politicians and government institutions are not responsive to their needs and preferences. While conceptually related, individual political efficacy and generalized sense of competence are not identical. Individuals may feel personally very competent to manage their own lives and yet believe that government does not respond to them. Previous research has demonstrated that this type of political inefficacy (perception of system unresponsiveness) is a major explanation of low participation (Campbell, et al., 1960; Verba and Nie, 1972; Milbrath and Goel, 1977).

In addition, the distinction between individual and group political efficacy needs to be drawn. In the process of group politicalization, the critical issue may not be one's sense of the government's and politicians' responsiveness to one's individual needs, since there are clear limits to the possibilities of personal impact in a complex world, but that of group efficacy. While individuals may feel politically ineffective because government appears to be unresponsive to them, they may, nevertheless, believe in the ability of their group to collectively influence political outcomes. In this case individuals may still participate despite low levels of individual political efficacy.

Individual and group political efficacy may both act, therefore, as sources of participation in politics. In addition, if age identification and these two types of political efficacy are negatively related, they may be important explanations for the relatively low turnout among old age identifiers. As the data displayed in Table 7 demonstrate, the strongest age identifiers were less politically efficacious than non-identifiers. The relationship between age identification and individual political efficacy was, however, quite weak. Even among non-identifiers more than half (55 percent) of the respondents expressed feelings of political inefficacy as individuals and this is not much lower than the 64 percent found for the strongest identifiers. In general, this expression of political powerlessness is more indicative of the times than of age identification since 49 percent of those under the age of 60 also felt inefficacious as individuals.

Table 7: Individual and Group Political Efficacy by Age Identification Among the Elderly, 1976

	Individual Efficacy[a]			Group Efficacy[b]	
Age Identification	High	Medium	Low	High	Low
Not Identified (N = 137)	32%	13	55	65%	35
Close (N = 245)	30%	13	57	52%	48
Closest (N = 152)	24%	12	64	43%	57

[a]Measured with a three item index, see Appendix for questions

[b]High group efficacy indicates the belief that the group to which the respondent feels "closest" can do something to increase their influence in American society and politics. Respondents who believed that their closest group could not increase their influence were classified as having low group efficacy.

Group efficacy, unlike individual efficacy, was sharply related with old age identification. Among the closest identified, 43 percent thought "older people" could do something to increase their influence in American life and politics. By comparison, 65 percent of the elderly who did not identify with older people believed that their "closest" group, whatever that was, could increase their influence.

Obviously, a significant proportion of old age identifiers feel inefficacious both as individuals and as members of their age group. These attitudes are strongly related with participation among the elderly in general and even more so among the closest age identifiers (see (Table 8). Thus they represent a powerful explanation for the lower involvement observed for the age identified. The combined effect of individual and

Table 8: Multivariate Analysis Predicting Political Participation from Old Age Identification, Individual and Group Political Efficacy

Predictors	Total 60 Years and Older	Closest Old Age Identifiers
Old Age Identification	-.03	—
Individual Political Efficacy	.11**	.27**
Group Political Efficacy	.25**	.30**
R	.32	.44

*p < .01 **p < .001

group efficacy reduces to nonsignificance the negative relationship between old age identification and participation. The regression

coefficients of Table 8 also reveal a good deal of independence between individual and group efficacy. Both types of efficacy appear to be important determinants of participation among the elderly. The exceptionally strong impact of group political efficacy is particularly noteworthy because the literature on political participation has not previously included this concept as a motivational basis for involvement.

Multivariate Summary

Thus far we have examined several different explanations for the unexpectedly lower participation rate among old age identifiers. The hypotheses entertained dealt with the availability of human and economic resources; personal characteristics, such as age denial and a sense of personal competence; and individual and group political efficacy. The results of a multivariate analysis presented in Table 9, incorporating all of these various explanations, provides an assessment of the relative importance of each explanation.

Table 9: Summary Multivariate Analysis Predicting Political Participation, 1976

	Total 60 Years and Older	Closest Old Age Identifiers
Predictors		
Old Age Identification	-.01	--
Age	-.07	-.23**
Education	.04	.04
Income	.16**	.10*
Age Denial	-.03	-.03
Personal Competence	.10*	.06
Individual Political Efficacy	.05	.21**
Group Political Efficacy	.18**	.23**
R	.41	.55

*p < .01 **p < .001

The coefficients in Table 9, for elderly people in general, reinforce what has appeared in the separate analyses presented above. In short, the lack of certain resources, particularly economic ones, a belief that the groups with which they identify cannot increase their power in society (group inefficacy), and a sense of personal powerlessness apparently depress turnout among the elderly. Moreover, what is most important to the major question of this paper, when these factors are controlled, age identification is irrelevant to turn out. The apparent lower turnout of the most closely identified is attributable to the fact that they have lower incomes, feel less personally competent in a generalized sense, and believe that their group lacks political efficacy. The remaining factors (including chronological age, age denial, and even individual political efficacy) are not significantly related to participation, and, therefore, offer little in explaining the negative correlation between age identification and turnout.

Two somewhat different conclusions can be drawn from the analysis just of the respondents who did closely identify with older people. First, as personal resources, it is chronological age rather than income that influences turnout. Second, apart from age itself, the other important factors determining participation (even after controlling for age) are the two types of political efficacy. The generalized sense of personal competence is not important in this identified group. Briefly, these results for the identified imply that, after removing the debilitating effects of socio-economic and age (or health) disadvantage experienced by older people, the important determinants of participation are political, not personal. Identified older people who felt that they were

politically efficacious as individuals and that older people as a group could increase their influence in society participated at higher rates than those who felt individually inefficacious and felt the elderly cannot do much to increase their power.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above demonstrates that among the elderly aging alone does not deter political participation. Income was a far more important factor influencing the political involvement of the total elderly sample than was chronological age. The relatively stronger effect of age on political participation among the closest old-age identifiers, therefore, is somewhat puzzling and requires further attention. Additional analysis demonstrates that the considerably stronger age relationship for the closest identifiers occurs because of exceptionally low turnout among the very oldest of the age identifiers. Only 37 percent of the closest identified over the age of 80 reported voting, whereas 69 percent of the same age group among the non-identifiers participated.

At first we thought the very low turnout exhibited by the oldest age identifiers could be accounted for by a heavily skewed sex distribution since 82 percent of these people were females and women generally tend to participate less than men. However, this explanation was eliminated by finding that the men in the group participated at a slightly lower rate than the women. Furthermore, the non-identified oldest age group (80 years and older) was also quite heavily populated with females (77 percent), thus sex differences between the two groups cannot explain the considerably lower turnout for the oldest set of age identifiers.

A better explanation is that our study had selected a sample of these people who were unusually ill. For example, when non-voting survey respondents were asked why they had not participated in the election, 20 percent of the oldest (80 years or more) age-identifiers but only 5 percent of the oldest non-identifiers mentioned ill health as a reason for not voting. Apparently, our sample contained a small set of respondents who were unusually ill at the time of the election. Removing this set of respondents--25 individuals or 16 percent of the closest old-age identifiers--from the analysis produces a relationship between age and turnout among the closest old age identifiers which is virtually the same as that for the non-identifiers (excluding those 80 years and older). In short, even among the strongest old age identifiers, chronological aging itself does not appear to be a major deterrent to political participation.

A second conclusion suggested by the analysis is that the negative relationship between political involvement and old age identification is spurious. The unexpectedly low participation rate found for old age identifiers is a result of their disadvantaged socio-economic condition. The lack of involvement displayed by the age identified elderly reflects resource deprivation rather than the acceptance or rejection of negative social stereotypes about the aged. These findings imply that participation among the elderly would be enhanced by improving their social and economic conditions.

Yet, group identification has mobilized the members of other subordinate groups despite a similar situation of economic disadvantage, so what is different among the elderly? A major difference springs from the perception of group efficacy. A majority of old age identifiers believe

there is nothing their group can do to increase its influence in society. And, taken together, the elderly are more pessimistic about increasing their influence than are members of other subordinate social groups. For example, previous research demonstrates that although the elderly are as discontented as identified blacks about their present power, many fewer identified older people (31 percent as compared with 71 percent of identified blacks) feel that their group's influence has increased in recent years (Gurin, Miller and Gurin, 1979). Furthermore, only half as many identified old as identified blacks believe that their groups could do much to increase its influence in the future. Their appraisal of the group's lack of efficacy by identified older people was also more negative than evaluations drawn by either identified blue-collar workers or women, neither of whom were as discontented about their power in the first place. Thus, in the aggregate, age consciousness among the elderly failed to realize its potential for mobilization because of this marked resignation about shifts in their influence and capacity to increase it in years to come.

Nevertheless, although identified older people taken together participated less than expected, those individuals who believed that the group could effectively mobilize and that the system would respond to them were more heavily involved in political activities. Clearly, organizational activities aimed at collective efforts among the elderly have a long way to go before they will be viewed as highly successful. Yet, the analysis presented above strongly suggests that the perception of organizational activity on the part of the elderly would act to stimulate political involvement. Age group consciousness, when coupled with a

feeling that the elderly can increase their influence in society, promotes political participation which goes well beyond what would be expected even after eliminating the disadvantaged socio-economic conditions of the elderly.

Footnotes

[1]The 1972 and 1976 national surveys employed in the data analysis were conducted by the University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Center for Political Studies. Both surveys involved personal interviews with a cross section sample of American citizens, 18 years and older selected through the normal stratified, probability sampling techniques employed by the Survey Research Center of the Institute for Social Research. The respondents were interviewed both before and immediately after the presidential elections in 1972 and 1976. The total pre-election sample numbered 2705 in 1972 and 2248 in 1976. The sample subset used in the analysis for this report includes respondents 60 years old and older, and because of the selection procedures employed, is a representative probability sample of elderly Americans.

[2]The increase in old age identification over the four year period was not the result of drawing an older sample in 1976. The mean age for the 1972 elderly sample (i.e., those 60 years and older) is 68.2 whereas that for 1976 is 69.8. The difference is clearly too small to account for the increase in old age identification.

Appendix

Personal Competence

The following four survey questions were used to measure a sense of personal competence:

1. Do you think it's better to plan your life a good way ahead, or would you say life is too much a matter of luck to plan ahead very far?

2. When you do make plans ahead, do you usually get to carry out things the way you expected, or do things usually come up to make you change your plans?

3. Have you usually felt pretty sure your life would work out the way you want it to, or have there been times when you haven't been sure about it?

4. Some people feel they can run their lives pretty much the way they want to; others feel the problems of life are sometimes too big for them. Which one are you most like?

Individual Political Efficacy

The following three survey questions were combined into an index to measure feelings of political efficacy from the perspective of the individual. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with each statement.

1. I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.

2. Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly.

3. Parties are only interested in people's votes but not in their opinions.

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